

December 2003

## Tidalectic Lectures: Kamau Brathwaite's Prose/ Poetry as Sound-Space

Anna Reckin

[anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com](mailto:anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium>

---

### Recommended Citation

Reckin, Anna (2003) "Tidalectic Lectures: Kamau Brathwaite's Prose/Poetry as Sound-Space," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol1/iss1/5>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal by an authorized editor of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact [repository.library@miami.edu](mailto:repository.library@miami.edu).

This paper looks at the ways in which Kamau Brathwaite draws on spatial paradigms in his work, in particular, paradigms that call attention to dynamic, sonic, and performative aspects of spatiality. I am interested in bringing together and overlaying some ideas about the key words in my title: Kamau Brathwaite's use of the term "tidalectic" and the notion of a sound-space. Three works, "History of the Voice," Barabajan Poems, and ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey, are discussed here as examples of a particular kind of sound-space, the transcribed lecture: an all-too familiar cultural space in the academy and the literary world that Brathwaite transforms into a venue for a dazzling performance on the page that encompasses drama, bibliography, autobiography, poetry, polemic, geography, literary theory, history, and much else besides.

Key to an understanding of this kind of space are its dynamic qualities. Brathwaite proposes "tidalectic" as "the rejection of the notion of dialectic, which is three—the resolution in the third. Now I go for a concept I call 'tide-alectic' which is the ripple and the two tide movement" (Naylor 145). Even the word-play between these terms, with its unsettling near-anagramming of "tida-" and "dia-," seems to perform a tidalectic movement in microcosm. On a larger scale, Brathwaite has suggested that it describes the structure of trilogies such as Mother Poem, Sun Poem, and X/Self, and the reprise of these three in Ancestors shows the "tidalectic" as a creative process; a process that I would argue also shows up very clearly in his radical reworking of the lecture form in the three texts I discuss here.

The tidalectic also describes a nexus of historical process and landscape, as in the following passage in ConVERSations which provides a defining image of the Caribbean and its origins, an "on-going answer" in Brathwaite's words (29): the image of an old woman sweeping the sand from her yard early every morning, who is

in fact performing a  
very important ritual which I  
couldn't fully understand but  
which I'm tirelessly tryin to .  
..  
And then one morning I see her  
body silhouetting against the  
sparkling light that hits the  
Caribbean at that early dawn  
and it seems as if her feet,  
which all along I thought were  
walking on the sand . . . were  
really . . . walking on the wa-  
ter . . . and she was tra-  
velling across that middlepass  
age, constantly coming from h

ere she had come from – in her  
case Africa – to this spot in  
North Coast Jamaica where she  
now lives . . . (33, ellipses as in original)

“Like our grandmother’s – our nanna’s – action,” Brathwaite says a little later, “like the movement of the ocean she’s walking on, coming from one continent / continuum, touching another, and then receding (‘reading’) from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future” (34).

This trans-oceanic movement-in-stasis, a to-and-fro and back again that is idealized and mythologized as well as highly particularized (“North Coast Jamaica”) and historicized (the reference to the “middlepass”) can be thought of as one aspect of something that can be termed a space--I would argue, a sound-space--with the following defining characteristics:

1. It presents a kind of recursive movement-in-stasis that is anti-progressive (the tidalectic) but also contains within it specific vectors: the westward, northward movements of the slave trade, the westward push of the harmattan, for example.
2. It is concerned with a sense of relation that is expressed in terms of connecting lines, back and forth, not only across the surface of the ocean—and there are clear parallels here with Glissant’s “poetics of relation” and the shipping routes that Paul Gilroy discusses in his *Black Atlantic*—but also in the form of airwaves and “bridges of sound” (radio broadcasts and sound recordings, for example) that connect colony with colony and colony with metropole, often enacting tidalectic echoes.<sup>1</sup>
3. It has access to something “beyond;” typical of Brathwaite’s work is a fantastical layering of New, Old, and other worlds. Vital here, and of course connected with the formal features noted in the previous item in this list, is the phenomenon of “hearing through” between layers, and between times and places, which has a particular application in Brathwaite’s work in terms of the practice of vodoun.

“Hearing- / reading-through” is also one of the key mechanisms articulating the inter-generic qualities of the texts, particularly noticeable when they are produced in “video-style:” the kinds of moves that use, for example, different type-sizes for what might be identified as secondary material or explicatory notation—although these may also have independent lives as poems or songs. Such interpolated materials, Brathwaite’s version of modernist collage, are not so much interruptions or even digressions but rather add a sense of enlargement and revelation. If annotation and citation can often be seen as devices to restrict the meanings of a text by calling attention to detail, particulars, specified authorities, Brathwaite’s additions simultaneously particularize and extend. Often playful as well as deeply serious, they insist on the on-going importance of

traditional academic and bibliographical tools for scholarship for West Indian history and literature—especially in the face of the neglect he considers them to have suffered, an important theme in all three texts discussed here. At the same time, they work transformatively, making creative use of typographical convention and opening up the work to new contexts, and to wider and deeper layers of signification.

In fact, the reader's movement in amongst some of the most thickly layered parts of Barabajan Poems and ConVERSations itself resembles a tidalectic action that is very different from the straight up-and-down-the-page, or front-to-back-of-the-book reading that is required by conventional scholarly annotation. To give one example from ConVERSations, the tidalectic in the movement of an old woman sweeping (33) is embedded in the course of a long answer by Brathwaite to a question from Mackey in ConVERSations about new trends in his work since 1986 (24). Surrounding this passage are interpolations in a cursive typeface and shown in a narrow column that describe the poverty of the Jamaica North Coast, for example: "is not a Jamaica North Coast bikini situatio /(n) that you would go to tomorrow or at Thank / sgiving. This is not the North Coast of the great / hotels, James Bond, 'GoldenEye' and tourism. / This is a ole yard, okay? . . ." (29-30). There are also various footnotes that deal with what Brathwaite calls "the Sisyphean statement" (30), Brathwaite's negative paradigm for Caribbean repetition which always ends, like Sisyphus' stone, back where it started, hope and effort wasted, in stark contrast to the back-and-forth flow of the tidalectic. Brathwaite's notes at this point become more and more scholarly identifying Walcott's phrase "the testament of poverty" as its locus classicus, providing a date for it, giving a lengthy quotation from Walcott's poem of that title with a citation for its publication in the magazine Bim, and supplying commentary locating "this negative tra-(d)" within Anglophone rather than Hispanic Caribbean writing, this time with bibliographical references to Brathwaite's own work (30-31)

4. It exhibits the performativity of sound: sound that reveals trans-oceanic relation (through rhyme and rhythm); sound that animates sound-space and brings the living and the dead into our presence—on the beach, under the tonnelle, through the "cool & glint & trinkle" (Ancestors 29) of water in limestone; sound as manifested in the calypso rhythm of the skipping stone that skids, arcs and blooms "into islands" ("History of the Voice" 272). For all these reasons, form is of crucial importance; the old woman's "moment and movement and grace and terror walking on the water" described in ConVERSations cannot be caught in "imposed meters," Brathwaite says, meaning iambic pentameters and tetrameters (35) and revisiting one of the key arguments of "History of the Voice." The revelations that are brought about by interconnecting sound and landscape can work at many levels. For example, the very next move in the passage quoted above about the old woman in the coastal landscape is to Miles Davis, "that muse/ical who was himself creating a spine of coral sound along our archipelago. . . . singing the shadows of the

clouds that move across our landscape" (35), at the same time as Davis is described as making song/ making landscape / making movement and connection in landscape, a series of combinations of c and l, often threaded with s's, loop through the lines, and picking up key words--muse/ical, coral, archipelago, cloud, landscape.

5. It exploits the potential of typography and book design to produce a textual kinetics. This is achieved partly through the use of a layered, palimpsestic text the trace of the tidalectic on the page--which can be connected with an understanding of particular topographies as palimpsestic, as always holding the possibilities of a variety of readings, histories, levels of interpretation; and partly through what Brathwaite terms his "video style," a mixture of typefaces and font sizes that features the distinctive Sycorax face designed by Brathwaite himself, and which is often decorated with graphics styled to look like elements from a font type. The books in the video style, which include ConVERSations and Barabajan Poems, are also very attentive to the space of the page and the way that the reader moves within the space of the book.<sup>2</sup> Brathwaite's highly developed use of typographical marking, which manipulates the hierarchies of graphic design, provides stepping (and skipping?) stones for a range of intra- and inter-textual manoeuvres, including, as Cynthia James (360) and Rhonda Cobham (300) have noted, a mimicking of hypertextuality.

A detailed discussion of the video style would warrant a separate paper; here I'd like to emphasize what it shares with other aspects of Brathwaite's treatment of sound-space: its textual dynamics and its function as a site for other-wordly presencing. For example, ConVERSations describes the Sycorax typeface in terms of a recuperation of Caliban's mother as "the Iwa who, in fact, allows me the space and longitude – groundation and inspiration . . . that I'm at the moment permitted" (189). In other words, through her foregrounding of one important aspect of textual materiality, typography (in this case the remarkable innovation of a type that has been made by the writer himself), she produces the conditions for poeisis--which the reader sees in process, performed on the page and in the book through the application of the video style. The loa doesn't merely inspire the poem, nor does she speak through the poet; her first task is to make space and ground from which to speak, from which the poem can be heard.

Examination of the spatial aspects of literature can sometimes be used as a way to identify what may be seen as conservatism, essentialism, or regression to a static pastoral ideal in a text--Afrocentrism seen purely in its regressive aspects, for example. Implicit in such critique is the idea that spatial constructs necessarily work prescriptively. Here I would like to argue for Brathwaite's work as an example of the way that attention to the spatial can offer the reverse--possibility, subversion, transformation, multi-directional openness. Whether the soundspace configures itself as lecture (as delivered, as written, as recorded), or ocean, as shore or radio broadcast or hounfort, one of its primary functions is as a channel of communication. But soundspace as described here is more than simply an exuberant and joyful place where diverse sounds meet and jam together. What is being described is also, of course, a metaphor for the complex operations of creolization. Brathwaite's video style is evidenced in O'Grady's tyrannical trickery,

enforcing mimicry, refusing "*nam*, the precious deep vibrations of the *mmmmmm*. . . [and] against Kinta Kunte. . . against woodsmoke & breadfruit cookin / down in de gully . . . against Damballa dancing in the D'Ogou belly" (Barabajan Poems 248). And all three texts here are sited at Legba's cross-roads: "on this ground / on this broken ground" (The Arrivants 266, Barabajan Poems 266).

This discussion focuses primarily on the more innovative features of Brathwaite's treatment of textual, historical, and geographical space. Also important, but not discussed in detail here, are conventional uses of spatial reference; for example, the lyrical descriptions of Barbadian landscape which inform the poet's discovery of his voice through his connection with specific places, a theme that is particularly powerful in the early sections of Barabajan Poems. Or, the use in that same text of a series of landscapes to structure biography and the development of consciousness / mythology, and thence the shape of the book itself—as shown in the sequence, Brown's Beach: "Genesis;" Mile & Quarter: "Revelation/Possession;" and Bathsheba: "Re/Creation of the Gods/Cosmos/" (96).

The three lectures that are the subject of this paper provide arenas for the performance of the kind of sound-space I have been describing and also discuss it thematically. The earliest, "History of the Voice," exists in at least three published versions. One of its appearances in print was in English Literature: Opening up the Canon, a collection of papers from the English Institute meeting in Harvard of 1979, edited by Leslie Fiedler and Houston Baker, where it was given the title of "English in the Caribbean: Notes on Nation Language and Poetry, an Electronic Lecture."<sup>3</sup> Baker gives an interesting frame for that lecture in a note:

Professor Brathwaite says of nation language that, "When it is written, you lose the sound or the noise, and therefore you lose part of the meaning." Surely this written representation of Professor Brathwaite's unscripted remarks, which I have edited, loses some of the magnificent force and meaning that his live performance conveyed in Cambridge. The reader, for example, will not only miss the sound of Professor Brathwaite's voice but also the sound of the taped recordings and accompanying music that added much to his presentation. Nonetheless, the following remarks are in themselves quite remarkable in what they convey of a new sense of sound, and noise, emerging from the present-day Caribbean. (15)

I should also mention a second (anonymous) note (the first one was signed H.A.B.), which tells us that "Professor Baker's sensitive version has been further revised by the speaker, who has added footnotes and some texts." Here, in the revisions and revisitings of the text and in its early title as an "Electronic Lecture" can be seen practices that carry on into the production of the other lecture-poems. Barabajan Poems, published in 1994, developed out of a lecture given in 1987 at the Central Bank of Barbados. What was originally a speech given at a formal occasion and attended by such dignitaries as the Prime Minister of Barbados (who introduced Brathwaite's talk), is transformed into poem, autobiography, vodoun performance (at key points we are

explicitly invited into the tonnelle), and protest against the mistreatment and neglect of Barbadian history, culture, and landscape. Lastly, ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey, published in 1999, started out as the transcript of a particular kind of literary occasion, a public discussion between the two poets in 1993, and builds on their on-going poetic conversation, including an earlier published interview in Mackey's magazine Hambone in 1991. Similar to Barabajan Poems, it expands into autobiography, bibliography, history, and polemic.

These lectures can also be seen as manifestations of sound-space and the tidalectic process in some of the details of their production. The "taped recordings and accompanying music" that Houston Baker referred to in the note quoted above included some items that worked as illustrations and examples alongside others that seem to produce acoustically one kind of creolized heteroglossic sound-space I am arguing for in Brathwaite's work. For example, a recording of a reading of one of McKay's poems by the poet himself is followed by the Agnus Dei from Fauré's Requiem (276); while a recording of George Campbell's work read by "our Milton of the Caribbean" (the words that Brathwaite uses to describe George Lamming), is followed by the opening of Beethoven's Fifth (278). It helps that Campbell's poem mentions "destiny" and "knocking at the door"! Playfulness apart, the point is to make an argument about the ways in which rhythm communicates—an argument that is extended by bringing West Indian nation language and its precursors into the sound-space of the Cambridge Massachusetts academic lecture: the words and music of the Mighty Sparrow singing calypso mocking English nursery rhymes, Miss Lou's "folk poetry," as well as John Figueroa, Miss Queenie, Michael Smith, Bongo Jerry, and Derek Walcott, to list but a few, along with references to sounds that would be closer to home for the North American audience, for example, Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Miles Davis (296).

The complexity of the sound relationships that Brathwaite traces can be seen clearly in the reasons he gives in "History of the Voice" as to why Eliot's poetry had been influential for Caribbean poets of the 1960s. One of these reasons has to do with voice: "What T.S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone. That is what really attracted us to Eliot" (286-87).<sup>4</sup> This aspect of Eliot can be seen, for example, in the opening of Brathwaite's "The Dust:"

Evenin' Miss  
Evvy, Miss  
Maisie, Miss  
Maud. Olive,

how you? How  
you, Eveie, chile?  
You tek dat Miraculous Bush  
fuh de trouble you tell me about?

Hush, doan keep so much noise  
in de white people shop!

But you tek  
it? (Arrivants 62)<sup>5</sup>

“The Dust” echoes on theme and tone various passages of The Waste Land, for example, the pub scene:

I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,  
It's them pills I took to bring it off, she said.  
(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)  
The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same.  
You are a proper fool, I said.  
Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,  
What you get married for if you don't want children? (35)

But for Brathwaite, it is the *sound* of Eliot's voice that made the difference. In an important footnote to “The History of the Voice,” he says, “For those of us who really made the breakthrough, it was Eliot's actual voice, or rather his recorded voice, property of the British Council (Barbados)—reading 'Preludes,' 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' The Waste Land, and later the Four Quartets—not the texts—which turned us on” (286). I want to point to the nesting that's going on here, and the complexities of the mediations: young Caribbean poets find inspiration, courtesy of an official body sponsored by the colonial government, in the recorded voice of an exiled and Anglophile American. The connections continue beyond the metropole as Brathwaite's gives a second reason for emphasizing Eliot: “In that dry, deadpan delivery, the 'riddims' of St. Louis (though we did not know the source then) were stark and clear for those of us who at the same time were listening to the dislocations of Bird, Dizzy, and Klook” (286). So what is finally (and of course, this isn't by any means to exhaust the layers) tuned into is jazz. Eliot provides not only evidence but a model of subversion through the agency of the British Council.

The other example Brathwaite gives of a subversive voice, this time one heard over the airwaves, is that of John Arlott, the British cricket commentator; and again, what is valued is the sound and rhythm of his voice, and the way it provides a model for difference from some “official” version of English, through that other very important official organ, the BBC. According to Brathwaite, Arlott

stunned, amazed, and transported us with his natural, 'riddimic' and image-laden tropes in his revolutionary Hampshire burr, at a time when BBC meant Empire and Loyal Models and Our Master's Voice, and cricket, especially against England, was the national sport . . . Not only was Arlott 'good' (all our mimics

tried to imitate him), but he subverted the establishment with the way he spoke and where: like Eliot, like jazz . . . ("History of the Voice" 286).

Brathwaite's "the way he spoke and where" is important here: sound and its subversion are heard through place. The BBC broadcasts and the British Council library make a place where Eliot and Arlott, (even the sound-echo of their names is interesting), and beyond them, the voices of exile and the metropolis, rural England ("Hampshire burr" as set against the language of cultured London) and St. Louis are encapsulated and transmitted.

The relationship between original sound-space (the discussion at Poet's House, New York) and published transcription in ConVERSations is more straightforward than in "History of the Voice," uncomplicated by external sound recordings. The overall outline of the book follows the typical shape of this kind of occasion, from the conversation between Mackey and Brathwaite, presented in Q&A format, to questions from the audience. From the beginning, however, the book presents itself as a performance before a group of people. Sections I and II are deferrals of the event, and frame it. The first is a dialogue between four voices, two of them children on their way to the performance still befuddled by "trying to remember the dream that makes us possible" (8). But "if we don't reach this lecture in Time," the voice goes on, "we'll never be real" (8). The second is a confession of the "dread" (in very large capitals) with which Brathwaite says he approaches interviews and their "threshold precariousness of improvisation," some notes on "the mechanics of this document," and a series of acknowledgements, including a long one expressing thanks to the audience—not so much for their attention, as for their movements within the room. He thus thanks

the audience at Poets House that night, for creating this ebb & flow of the tides from time to time – esp at the beginning, a few people still coming in, getting subtle etc – when I think - even tho these movements are ever so 'slight' and unintentional etc – that I might lose the very momentum of the genesis – the no longer THRESHOLD – but the intransigent ideas & how best how ACCURATE to wrestle them upon the threshold floor. (14)

Just as Sycorax's loa, in the form of a potential in a machine and a typeface on screen and page, makes location an occasion for enunciation so that the tidalectic movements of human listeners settling into a physical space create the conditions both for the "momentum" of the "improvisation" of the conversation, and for the attention to detail that the reader of the published version will recognize in the precise movements of the book's intertextual layerings.

Another example from the three lectures, Barabajan Poems, has to do with transmission of a different kind, the operations of sound in the hounfort. The text makes explicit reference to places where lecture may overlap with religious performance. The formalities with which the book/lecture begin include not only thanks for the invitation to speak, and a reminder of current events (the death of James Baldwin, the 21st anniversary of Barbadian Independence, and the

overthrow of the newly elected president of Haiti), but "a libation to three great peaceful powerful beautiful spirits" both present and not present at this occasion: Brathwaite's mother, his wife, and the writer Frank Collymore (19). The first words of the first page of the lecture, picked out in large gothic script are "first of all;" the last words to appear on that page, on the last line, can be read with them: "welcome you into the tonnelle"(19).

This invitation is reiterated at the end of Section V of the book, when the narrator makes a pause after a series of reminiscences about his early life as a writer in Barbados, Cambridge, and Africa, and with it a strategic turn to the presence of Africa in the Caribbean as personified by great-uncle Bob'ob, who is also a manifestation of Legba and Ogoun (152). The drama of the pause at this point, which opens a section of memories of Mile & Quarter where Bob'ob's carpenter's workshop is located, and which will lead to a video re-styling of the poem "Ogoun" from The Arrivants, is heightened by its typographical treatment; it is started on a new page in a fairly large type. The typeface itself, however, is highly informal; its different-sized letters jiggle up and down to give a jaunty, offhand effect, reinforcing the text's message as it coaxes the audience about "gettin too lull too sleepy too relax . . . doan leff me nyet try hole on a bit longer" (147). The passage ends with a pun that is part-joke, part-ritual, part-serious train-journey-styled transition: "But you are, I hope, beginning to see the light an we comin in comin in comin in comin in comin in inna the tonnelle" (148).

It is not until Section VII of the poem, however, that the audience is taken fully into the hounfort, and the "Gods of the Middle Passage" make their entrance. The narrator revisits the building that had housed Bob'ob's carpentry shop, now used as a Zion meeting place. It's a Wednesday night, and the prayer meeting is about to begin. A prelude to what will unfold is given in a passage that moves out from the beaches and coves of Barbados into

a great slow glowing listening of  
 meaning . there on the simple unknown countryroad but known to all of us &  
 lived & loved like all its smells of smoke and cooking all its ghost(s) & children  
 all its birds & insects twittering. all **altering** as I listen listen listen . from being  
 'Bajan' into *something other something else* - and nearer nearer better known than  
 we had ever known before . so mething forgotten yes and far & far & (170)

The way into the space of listening is through the remembered presence of Bob'ob, who has now become Legba, preparing the way for Ogoun, Shango, and Damballa. Shango's presence is brought into the text by the evocation of trainsongs, represented first by means of a textbook-like list, an accumulation of facts and commentary interlined with additional commentary in smaller type, through which sing out the names of musicians, forms,<sup>6</sup> the titles of songs (a parallel perhaps to a lengthy list of African place-names a few pages earlier), and then by a quotation in very large type from the most onomatopoeic section of "Folkways" from Rights of Passage (The Arrivants 33): "so come / quick cattle / train, lick / the long / rails . . ." (174). All this precedes the entrance of Damballa, which is announced with a hissing "which was like an 'opposite' or

rather // cattacornier // sound & rhythm to what the rest of the room/ sound (womb/ song) was doing" (177). The speaker finally enters the building and puts together what's happening there as a "choreography of sound" (180) that takes in the various loa, the church worshippers, and the panting sound of a woman who is possessed. These combine towards a climax that is also a tidalectic movement:

By now the people in the shop are no longer singing in English or Bajan . . . . .  
. . . . . they are into the pull of an  
alteration of consciousness as if the tides of their lives have paused on the brin(k)  
of falling onto our beaches & instead have slowly lifted themselves up up so that  
the cries that should have been breaking from their crests do not move anymore  
but glisten in the deep silence of their throats until they begin to sweep slowly  
backwards like away from our shore from our trees from our hills away from  
Barbados . sweeping away into a new dark wail that sweeps us all up . . .  
out out towards a new meaning out there . (181-182)

Lecture hall (named after Collymore), workshop, church, hounfort, Barbados, seashore, ocean, and Africa; family, academe, government, nation, loa, and geography have all come together at this point in the book:

it takes me back & drags me tidalectic into this tangled urgent meaning to & fro .  
like foam . saltless as from the bottom of the sea . dragging our meaning our  
moaning/ song from Calabar along the sea-fl-oor sea-floor with pebble sound &  
conch & sea-sound moon  
It could have been Yemanjaa . That night it was Damballa . dancing with th-at  
whisper of a sound inside a simple unsuspecting shop in Mile&Q, Barbados (182)

This is also a crucial turning point in the book, the occasion for a deep examination of "how we cope with the persistent legacies of the plantation" (184)--loneliness, disappointment, dispossession, poverty, and fear--through narrative, memory, drama, possession, reclamation of Bajan/African spiritualities and their complex intermeshings.

The focus shifts to the story of the woman, a regular attender of the Wednesday night service at the Zion church, who is possessed. This is a version of a poem first published as "Angel / Engine" in *Mother Poem* (*Ancestors* 131) collaged with commentary by an observer.<sup>7</sup> It's this observer who locates the woman's experience, sees the image of Brathwaite's cosmological missile and capsule in the room, and who emphasizes the terrible struggle and break between a stuttered "G" that will not spell God and the fiery thunder and hiss of Shango. This much fuller account of the woman's possession is far more jagged than the one in "Angel/Engine," but like that poem it shows the transformation as being brought about by trainsongs--literal lines of connection/communication that are also layers of sound: the hiss and thump and rumble of the train and its rhythms (the sounds that signal Shango in the description

of the early stages of the ceremony). In a characteristic appendix to Barabajan Poems, Brathwaite identifies the words of the songs as coming out of West Africa and spreading through Brazil, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Trinidad, "early New Orleans," and the USA (369).

Section VII ends with the declaration, in some of the largest type to be used in the book, and spread over two pages, that

After this it  
Became  
possible – more  
possible? – for  
mwe/ for us  
to begin to  
enter/ repossess  
our  
Igbo  
BaJan  
landscape (204-205)

This opens the way for a series of evocations of specific Barbadian landscapes, a kind of interlude before the return to a discussion of history and politics in Section XII, but of course it is far more than an introduction to these. If poet (and text) are to extend themselves beyond nostalgic pastoral memoir, beyond even a Wordsworthian recollection of the growth of a poet's mind in a specific landscape, it is essential that they enter the sound-space of the Bajan hounfort, hear its cries and rhythms, witness what Brathwaite calls "the kinesis of 'possession'" in his discussion of Shango trainsongs in Appendix VII of the book (370).

I would like to conclude by revisiting the discussion of the way that Brathwaite manipulates the formal structures of the lecture in Barabajan Poems. In a fascinating edit from lecture to book, the formula "first of all" (in the same gothic script as on the first page of the book) is repeated in the closing pages of the book, beginning a second set of thanks and grateful formalities that originally appeared at the start of the lecture: "before I launch into this. . . not lecture. . . but a sharing with you" (268).<sup>8</sup> The thanks start with an expression of gratitude for the recognition received that includes a joking reference to "The Artist's Dressing Room with NAME . . . on the legba door (remember?) and large photos all over the palace" (268). The casualness and geniality of this is followed by a long and increasingly lyrical riff on ancestors and ancestral landscapes, and ends with wording that echoes the "first of all" (268): "and look now, Mr Chairman, Yr Xcellencies, ladies & gentlemen . . . look how far . . . we are be/come" (269, ellipses as in original).

This tidalectic move brings the performance of book, lecture, ritual, and history together, making what has happened since the first description of the lecture's formalities seem like an

exploratory insertion--but it does not in fact close the book. The rest of page 269 is blank, with the symbol for Shango placed like a seal or a publisher's colophon in the center. Then the text shifts voice again, to show a series of Bajan folk proverbs in very large type, one or two per page, another tribute, Brathwaite writes, this time to the collector of the proverbs, Margot Blackman, and to "our NYU Bajan Fola."<sup>9</sup> The final reaching out and drawing in happens on the last two pages of the main text (it's worth noting that the book is supplied with particularly rich critical apparatus: notes and references, seven appendices, and an index), with yet another movement of reversal: from the final proverb, "**sea /doan have no / BACKDOOR**" (282) to the declaration "X- / cept that our house on Brown's Beach was just / that – **the sea's / BACKDOOR**" (283). The word "backdoor" is written in very heavy, almost impenetrable gothic capitals, and looks like a fence. Underneath it, the final typographical element of the main text, are three squared dots, centered; do they mark the end of a section, or are they ellipses? Either way, the implication is of more to follow. The very last movements in the book's main text are thus from ocean back to island/origin, and between seeming closure and opening: Legba's pivot.

But this is also one part of one of the book's large-scale tidalectic gestures. If one turns back to the first mention of Brown's Beach, in an anecdote about a discussion between the critic Gordon Rohlehr and Brathwaite's mother" that provides the opposite book-end to this passage, we read that "when she was growing up on Brown's Beach, the sea was much further out . . . and her mother told her that even before that, that out there. . . there were farms. . ." (24, last two ellipses as in the original).<sup>10</sup> This description, which takes the sea back and away, is immediately followed by a backwards/forwards movement that takes the reader into the first childhood memory of that beach, "First as it is now, / or almost now" (24). Text and physical landscape alike are subject to the sway of the ocean, the ultimate tidalectic sound-space.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>My emphasis on acoustic technologies here derives partly from Adalaide Morris's very useful discussion in "Sound Technologies and the Modernist Epic: H.D. on the Air." Morris includes the telephone in her list of sonic devices, and as Aldon Nielson points out in reviewing Brathwaite's Words Need Love Too, the telephone call, which he describes as a "neo-space" (203) can provide a complex metaphor through which to explore diaspora, community, memory, and the transmission of "vowels of glistance." The poem Nielson is discussing here, "JerryWard & the fragmented spaceship dreamstorie," is yet another reassemblage of lecture, an attempt to retrieve via a telephone conversation what had been "staining in" the mind of a listener since hearing a lecture of Brathwaite's some years earlier (203).

<sup>2</sup>Brathwaite's on-going revisions of older work now routinely involve a process of transcription into the video style; the most significant example to date is the "reinvention" (as Brathwaite describes it on the title page) of Mother Poem, Sun Poem, and X/Self as Ancestors. The video-style reinventions can be considered to be another aspect of the recursive tidalectic process, this time at the level of typography.

<sup>3</sup>Other versions of the talk appeared as a book-length publication of 1984; and as an essay in the collection Roots, (originally published by Casa de las Américas in Cuba in 1986 – the essay itself is dated 1979 / 1981 in that volume).

<sup>4</sup>Brathwaite is quite explicit about Eliot's subversive influence: "it is interesting that on the whole, the establishment could not stand Eliot's voice – and far less jazz" (286).

<sup>5</sup>This poem is also excerpted in Barabajan Poems (142-144).

<sup>6</sup>For example, "worksong fieldhollers . howlinwolf blues gospel & boogie-woogie . R&B. some rock. and all that soul" (173).

<sup>7</sup>As described earlier for the operations of the Sycorax typeface, the presence of the loa and its enunciations are important particularly insofar as they open up a sound-space, something that "allows . . . the space and longitude – groundation and inspiration." The expansion out from the single consciousness of the possessed woman in "Angel/Engine" – which is like a single point traversed by the sounds of the railroad line and the oncoming trajectory of the train – into the two- and three-dimensional "choreography of sound" in the Barabajan Poems version is interesting in two respects: first as a recognition of the increasing importance of multi-dimensional sound-space, and secondly perhaps as a move away from describing possession primarily in a way that invites direct bardic identification (the loa riding the woman is also the loa riding the poet) to a more complex representation that acknowledges place and ground as the antecedents of enunciation. As the space is opened up, so are numerous other perspectives that add to and do not dilute the still highly accessible and extremely powerful voice of the woman / loa. Rhonda Cobham's vivid description of the use of typography in this passage calls attention

to the way that positioning (literal and figurative) includes emotions like embarrassment on the part of the "scholarly" observer, whom she sees as "cower[ing] on the periphery of the ritual he is describing" (303).

<sup>8</sup>In fact, the main statements of thanks (to the Central Bank of Barbados "for bringing me here at this time" and the statement about launching and sharing are repeated verbatim. The rest of the text at these two points branch in different directions; one of the significant differences between them is that the first one acknowledges friends and family, while the second emphasizes landscape and "the long journey," in effect supplying a geographical summary of the book.

<sup>9</sup>Fola is identified as a "Plantation" Personality Type in the index to Barabajan Poems, alongside such "icons, ancestors and loa" Bob'ob, Caliban, and Anancy (395, see also 316); she a character from Lamming's Season of Adventure who typifies a woman who finds herself through possession. Here the reference is to her manifestation in the person of a Barbadian student of Brathwaite's at NYU, who finds a way to engage positively with her "submerged" Caribbean heritage through the study of its literature, and in particular, the proverbs that Blackman collected (328).

<sup>10</sup>This anecdote is itself a playful twist on the theme of reworked lectures, describing an occasion when Brathwaite's mother was in the audience for a lecture by Rohlehr at the University of Sussex, and set out to correct some biographical details "so that in the end it was she giving the lecture and it was he (he also tells the story) who was happy to listen & learn " (24)

## Works Cited

- Baker, Houston and Leslie Fiedler (eds.) English Literature: Opening Up the Canon. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1981.
- Brathwaite, Kamau. Ancestors: A Re-invention of Mother Poem, Sun Poem, and X/Self. New York: New Directions, 2001.
- . The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy: Rights of Passage, Islands, Masks. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973.
- . Barabajan Poems 1492–1992. Kingston and New York: Savacou North, 1994.
- . ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey. New York: We Press, 1999.
- . "History of the Voice." Roots. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993.
- . Words Need Love Too. Philipsburg, St. Martin: House of Nehesi, 2000.
- Cobham, Rhonda. "K/Ka/Kam/Kama/Kamau: Brathwaite's Project of Self-Naming in Barabajan Poems." For the Geography of a Soul: Emerging Perspectives on Kamau Brathwaite. Ed. Timothy J. Reiss. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, 2001. 297–315.
- Eliot, T.S. The Waste Land. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962.
- Gilroy, Paul. The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Glissant, Edouard. Poetics of Relation. Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1997.
- James, Cynthia. "Caliban in Y2K – Hypertext and New Pathways." For the Geography of a Soul: Emerging Perspectives on Kamau Brathwaite. Ed. Timothy J. Reiss Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, 2001. 351–361.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. "Interview with Edward Kamau Brathwaite." Hambone 9 (Winter 1991): 42–49.
- Morris, Adalaide ed. Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997.
- Naylor, Paul. Poetic Investigations: Singing the Holes in History. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern UP, 1999.

Nielson, Aldon. Review of K. Brathwaite, Ancestors and Words Need Love Too. Xcp: Cross Cultural Poetics 11 (2002): 203-10.